

An engaging tale of race and refugees



Lisa Ramirez and Colman Domingo play lovers in "Maleta Mulata."

Cuban American memory play is fine first effort

By Robert Hurwitt
EXAMINER THEATER CRITIC

THE PAST haunts the present in "Maleta Mulata," a first play by poet Jorge Ignacio Cortiñas in its world premiere at Intersection for the Arts. Family history has more than one reality in this Cuban American memory play, secrets explode inopportunely, and those most determined to escape the past are as trapped as those who cling to it. And then there's the ghost.

The latest production by the impressive young Campo Santo troupe, "Maleta Mulata" has some of the expected faults of a first play. It relies on a few shopworn devices and at least one illogical leap, has its redundant passages and contains themes that could be better developed. But Cortiñas is a beguilingly poetic writer with a bitersweet humor and a clever way of twisting expectations.

"Maleta" isn't always engrossing throughout its two hours. But it's an attractive, engaging, at times compelling and genuinely affecting show in director Paulo Nunes-Ueno's rich, musically paced production. And it marks the debut of an impressive new voice. Cortiñas is a writer to keep an eye on.

The title is a poetic conundrum. "Maleta Mulata" means "mulatto suitcase." Not that the suitcase that becomes a recurring image is actually of mixed race. But the action of the play is the packing and unpacking of a Cuban refugee family's past. And race, right down to degrees of skin color, is as much a part of that baggage as knee-jerk anti-communism for the family matriarch, who warns her daughter not to stay out in the sun or "people will forget you're white."

There's a suitcase full of secrets too, especially for the sisters who've emigrated from Cuba. We see Marina's (Lisa Ramirez) secret in the first scene, many years earlier, on the eve of their departure. She's taking painful leave of her clandestine lover Barbarito (Colman Domingo), hiding their affair from her judgmental sister Olga (Wilma Bonet), the prime mover in the family's repatriation.

The fact that Barbarito is her husband's married brother isn't the main reason Olga would be horrified. Worse, he's the darker colored brother, and an enthusiastic singer-songwriter in Fidel's revolution to boot. Which is why, all these years in Miami, Olga's been intercepting and hiding Barbarito's letters to Marina. She's also been hiding from her family the truth about her degenerative spinal disease.

You can see how the baggage of the past keeps piling up. Marina, who's just left her husband ("This man I married is taking all my air"), still yearns for the romance she left behind so long ago, even as

the ghost of recently deceased Barbarito pursues her. Olga, determined as she thinks she is to break with the past, is still desperately seeking "a way to get back to where we're supposed to be" in terms of lost economic and social status.

Her teen children, whom she's raised alone ever since her husband Gustavo (Michael Torres) left her for a string of younger women, have their secrets, too. Daughter Cari's (Cristina Frias) are of the onset-of-puberty and hidden bikini variety. Son Papo (Timothy Rodriguez) is playing the riskier game of juggling two girlfriends, with results that leave him trying to live up to his own false images of his father's better side.

Cortiñas is creatively realistic in the ways his characters' plans and expectations go awry and their biggest revelations fall on ironically deaf ears. And the Campo Santo cast uses each of those moments to add to the depth of the characters.

Bonet's solid Olga anchors the play, jaw set against repeated disappointments and hidden physical pain, eyes alive with false hopes and fierce prejudices. Ramirez is plaintively torn in her flashbacks with Domingo's smooth Barbarito, and all sharp-angled bitter regret in the present (though she's less convincing in the full fury of her final confrontation with her sister).

Frias and Rodriguez show beautiful growth in the teen roles, with Frias delicately developing beneath

the comedy of Cari's pubescent pains and Rodriguez taking compellingly tentative steps toward manhood in the end. Torres is painfully self-deceptive in his awkward, glad-handing attempts to be a buddy to his son, and Roberto Robinson is a delightful, affectingly naive teen with a crush on Cari.

Nunes-Ueno stages the action fluidly on James Faerron's set of aluminum prefab wall frames, bathed in the soft blues and reds of Drew Yerys' lights. Elise Baldwin's surf-and-seabird soundscape and a lilting salsa score by Josh Jones and Abel Sanchez (with haunting recorded vocals by Scheherazade Stone) add to the ambient depth. And Nunes-Ueno brings the focus in tight on Cortiñas' most quietly resonant scenes, such as the brilliant domino game in which Olga and Gustavo dissect their past.

Cortiñas' "Maleta" isn't as tight or compelling a package as you feel it wants to be, but it packs a lot of dramatic rewards as well as intriguing promise into one suitcase.

THEATER REVIEW 'Maleta Mulata'

►PLAYWRIGHT Jorge Ignacio Cortinas

►DIRECTOR Paulo Nunes-Ueno

►CAST Lisa Ramirez, Wilma Bonet, Cristina Frias, Timothy Rodriguez

►THEATER Campo Santo, Intersection for the Arts, through April 26 (415-626-3311)

CAMPO SANTO a resident theater company of Intersection for the Arts

MALETA MULATA

by Jorge Ignacio Cortinas

directed by Paulo Nunes-Ueno

Campo Santo, a resident theater company of Intersection for the Arts,
 presents the world premiere of Maleta Mulata
 Intersection for the Arts, 446 Valencia Street, San Francisco
 THREE WEEKS ONLY! • April 8-26, 1998 • 415 626 3311

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STAGE



PHOTO BY STEPHEN MITCHELL

Cuban ghosts it so poetically conjures up. *Previews Wed.–Fri., 8 p.m. Opens Sat., 8 p.m. Runs Thurs.–Sun, 8 p.m. 446 Valencia, S.F. \$9–\$14 (Thurs., pay what you can). (415) 626-3311. (Josh Kun)*

A case of displacement: Jorge Ignacio Cortinas' first play, a beautiful meditation on immigrant life in Miami, features Lisa Ramirez and Colman Domingo.

'Maleta mulata'

April 8–26, Intersection for the Arts

ONE THING Jorge Ignacio Cortinas knows for sure: there is music in memory. Throughout the Bay Area writer's stirring first play, *Maleta mulata*, landscapes of loss, desire, and race between Miami and Cuba are transformed into extended boleros of displacement and national doubleness. Directed by Paulo Nunes,

with original music by local luminaries Josh Jones and Abel Sanchez, this Campo Santo production of *Maleta mulata* elegantly tells the story of two '80s-Miami sisters whose family fled the island after the revolution, leaving behind old lives and old loves (most significantly for the sleepwalking Marina, the singing specter of a mulatto musician). What results is an often painful, often humorous, and always beautiful meditation on immigrant life in Miami, one that in Cortinas's able hands is as memorable for the Cuban American futures it imagines as the